DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 716 HE 033 571

AUTHOR Bailey, Yardley Selwyn; Wright, Vivian H.
TITLE Innovative Uses of Threaded Discussion Groups.
PUB DATE 2000-11-15
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid South Educational Research Association (Bowling Green, KY, November 15-17, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Software; *Computer Uses in Education; *Discussion Groups; *Electronic Mail; Higher Education; *World Wide Web

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how faculty from various disciplines at one southeastern university used the threaded discussion group feature of such integrated Web packages as FrontPage, Blackboard, and WebCT. Ten faculty members from the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, Communication, Engineering, and Nursing were surveyed. Qualitative analysis of results indicated wide variations in the courses using discussion boards, in provision of instructions to students, in discussion organization, in professorial participation, in student participation requirements, and in assessment of discussion participation. Overall, professors felt the online discussion format encouraged students who did not participate in class to express themselves and encouraged all students to formulate their thoughts at a deeper level. The time commitment of the instructor was seen to be the primary disadvantage of the online format. (Contains 13 references.) (DB)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 446 716

Innovative Uses of Threaded Discussion Groups

Yardley Selwyn Bailey *
Group Leader (acting)
Faculty Resource Center
The University of Alabama
Box 870346
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
(205) 348-6023
E-mail: selwyn@frc.ua.edu

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Y. Bailey
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Vivian H. Wright, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Secondary Education
The College of Education
The University of Alabama
Box 870232
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
(205) 348-1401
E-mail: vwright@bamaed.ua.edu

*Corresponding Author

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HE035571

Innovative Uses of Threaded Discussion Groups

Abstract

Institutions of higher education throughout the United States and abroad are focusing on the installation and use of instructional technology in classroom settings. This infusion of technology has increased as the technological sophistication of students has increased. The administrative leaders of colleges and universities, who must be concerned with enrollment, believe that to be competitive their institutions must offer computer labs, Internet connections in dormitories, and sophisticated classrooms that have computers, video players, video monitors or projectors, liquid crystal display (LCD) panels, and the latest presentation software. An emerging trend is the use of integrated web packages like FrontPage, Blackboard, and WebCT. One prominent feature of these packages and at universities interested in emerging technologies is threaded discussion groups. This presentation will focus on exploratory questions of how faculty from various disciplines at one southeastern university has discovered innovative ways to use discussion groups, lessons learned from these uses, the evaluative summaries of such uses, and how future faculties can incorporate these lessons in their future classes.

Introduction

Research has shown that students who participate in integrated lessons using discussion groups as a component engage in more constructivist learning and exhibit deeper thought through written discourse (Merron, 1998). It has also been shown that students who typically do not participate in traditional classroom discussion tend to participate more in threaded discussion groups (Schallert, Benton, Dodson, Lissi, Amador, & Reed, 1998). This can give all students in a given class an additional opportunity to participate in discussion of a subject resulting in a

broader range of experiences and views presented and an opportunity to reorganize their own intuitive knowledge base.

With emerging technologies, many users at higher education institutions are at first hesitant, primarily because they did not have a technology mentor and did not learn in such a highly technological environment themselves. Faculty members may be, in some cases, trying to achieve stages of technological literacy one step ahead of their students. Other faculty members are more hesitant to try new technologies, especially those online and asynchronous in nature due to a perception that online courses and those tools associated with them are impersonal. While computer mediated communication can allow for a wider use of interactive communication and can encourage administrators and teachers to focus even more on instructional design (Berg & Collins,1995), advocates of distance education and technological innovations must justify their work as an alternative in the face of time, distance, and economic barriers. Further, in order to use distance learning strategies, faculty may need to alter teaching styles used within the synchronous, traditional classroom and face certain challenges in that adaptation (Dillon & Walsh, 1992 & Clark,1993). Faculty support for such efforts is important from developing technology use policies to faculty training (Rockwell, Schauer, Schauer, & Marx, 2000; Betts, 1998). The ease of use from hardware to software is also important and should be transparent in discussion group usage. Palloff and Pratt (1999) stated that the "software should be in the background, acting only as a vehicle for course delivery" (p. 64). Technology has the potential to open the doors of a university to a wider audience, provide options for non-traditional students, and extend services to populations that would otherwise not be able to attend classes on campus. The circumstances are changing and the use of asynchronous learning via technologies, such as the Internet and discussion groups, provide an

interactive methodology that can provide instruction comparable or superior to that offered in a traditional classroom (Gifford, 1992; Goldberg, 2000).

New technologies consistently provide educators and learners with new forms of mediation, and new opportunities for social interactions and methods that actively involve students and present challenges. Mediation through the emerging community of the Internet is providing new linkages and opening a world of group activities and environments in which the learner may interact. Such technologies as two-way video conferencing, electronic mail, and the focus of this study, discussion groups, provide new patterns of mediation.

Through computer mediated discussion groups, an index contains hyperlinks to an area of interest submitted by a user. A response to a previous posting creates a hyperlink to the new article that is indented below the original. All articles, questions, and responses are available through the index and can be arranged according to the date posted or subject. Many faculty members are searching for innovative ways to use available technologies to enhance instruction and to increase asynchronous learning opportunities for the student and turn to discussion groups as a viable possibility. Palloff and Pratt (1999) summarized some basic steps that should be taken in building an online community. Those included: 1) defining a clear purpose, 2) defining online rules, 3) and allowing for facilitation within subgroups. Peters (2000) advised that on-line discussions should integrate the same content as in face-to-face class activities. Peters further advised that instructors should provide training for the students on how to use the technology and should be conscious of simplicity when providing topics. Knowlton, Knowlton, and Davis (2000) recommend that discussions be designed with interaction and valued in grading procedures with continuous feedback.

The researchers of this study are both employed in faculty technology advisory/liaison roles and were interested in how faculty members perceived the use of threaded discussion groups and how their use enhances the teaching and learning process. This study was intended as an exploratory study to investigate how faculty members from different disciplines were using discussion groups to enhance their classroom experiences, novel uses of discussion groups, how the postings to the discussion groups were planned and made, and how the students were evaluated on their discussion group participation and contribution. Such exploratory findings can be helpful in evaluating uses and in making future recommendations to faculty and institutions interested in pursuing further uses of technology.

Method

Faculty members using discussion groups within undergraduate and graduate classes from various colleges at the university of this study were contacted via electronic mail (e-mail) during fall, 2000. This convenience sample consisted of 10 faculty members from the colleges of Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, Communication, Engineering, and Nursing.

Each faculty member was sent e-mail with specific questions to answer. Those questions were based on the researchers' knowledge of how discussion groups were typically formed and used in educational settings, preliminary conversations with faculty, and the review of literature of discussion group use. The questions were:

- What instructions did you give students before their first experience with the discussion group?
- Were discussion topics selected by the students, by the instructor, or a combination of both?
- How have you organized your discussion groups? Small group? Clusters? Assigned? Voluntary?
- Did you participate in the postings?
- What are the primary benefits you have noticed from the use of threaded discussion groups in your class?
- How often did you review the postings?

- Do you require your students to post a question? Do you require your students to post a response?
- Are your students graded for question postings? Are your students graded for response postings?
- What differences have you noted between how students interact in class and how they interact with the discussion group?
- State the primary advantage/disadvantage of discussion groups?
- What improvements do you plan for your use of discussion groups?

Results

The qualitative collection of data through email response of the faculty follows. The majority of the respondents used discussion groups in undergraduate classes. English, Engineering, and Education professors also used discussion groups in graduate classes. The participants were using discussions in a wide range of courses including educational psychology, rhetorical theory, professional communication, English literature, history, artificial intelligence, nursing research, and counselor education.

Instructions

The majority of the respondents provided limited or no instructions on how to use the discussion board. Four professors provided limited instructions on how to reach the discussion board and some guidelines on responding to questions. Only two professors provided detailed instructions in the course packets. These same two professors, both in Nursing, also made a videotape available for check-out. The communications professor reminded the students that their comments were not anonymous and one education professor posted a test message to ensure that all students understood how to use the discussion board.

Topics

Among this small sample, there was no consistency on how topics were chosen for the discussions. Some topics were selected by the instructor, others by students, and others by a combination of both student and instructor.

Organization

The question, *how have you organized your discussion groups*, also brought a variety of responses. One professor assigned a topic weekly, while three provided no directions but rather a forum. One history professor noted, "We have done little more than provide a forum. We probably need to structure it in the future." The communication professor stated that she encouraged the students to view the discussion group as an "e-journal "

Participation

Only three professors chose not to participate in the discussions. One professor noted that she participated only when students asked her to participate. Others participated on a regular basis.

Primary Benefits

The overall theme in the responses to "what are the primary benefits you have noticed from the use of threaded discussion groups in your class?" was that the discussion boards gave students opportunities to think at a deeper level, thus developing critical thinking on specific topics. One professor also noted that the discussion boards give students a written record for further study. The communications professor noted: "Students who do not feel comfortable talking in class, especially when expressing ideas they think will differ from others, often become more involved."

Posting Review by Instructor

Only one professor did not participate in postings for the discussion groups. Most participated at least once a week, with one participating daily and one participating on the due date of the discussion assignment.

Posting Requirements

Respondents were asked if they required students to post a question and/or a response. Five required posting a response only. Four made no requirements, but viewed the board as a forum for voluntary discussion. The education counseling professor required both. This professor noted, "I think that having the discussion group gives students time to think about the questions that they want to discuss. I also think that the discussion group provides a great opportunity for students to have a written record of questions and responses."

Discussion Assessment

Five professors did not use the discussion participation as a form of assessment. Three of the respondents used the students' participation in online discussions as part of their class participation grade, but without restraints. One of the English professors stated: "I don't want to make this punitive in any way and I certainly don't grade on grammar." The nursing professors used participation as part of the students' weekly laboratory grades. One professor gave extra credit for participation and noted, "Well-developed responses, demonstrating critical thought and reflection, can earn extra credit."

Differences Noted

The researchers were interested in learning what differences the professors noted between how students interact in class and how they interact with the discussion group. The underlying theme in the responses dealt with participation. One of the English professors noted, "I get some very good responses from students who are rather quiet in class." The engineering professor stated, "Some tend to interact more in class after they note that I encourage information exchange through the discussion board." And, from education, "Students who do not participate in class sometimes do better in discussion forums." Interestingly, the only professor who did not

note this type of response was from communication who noted that the students in communication studies missed the visual cues not available in online discussion boards.

Primary Advantage/Disadvantage

The primary advantage seemed to be that students were able to formulate thoughts at a deeper level, with the primary disadvantage being the time commitment on the part of the instructor. A nursing professor noted, "Discussion groups make students formulate their thoughts . . . Discussion groups also provide a mechanism for the faculty to document that each student did an assignment and to retrieve this information in an organized way." The respondent from communications summarized the majority's view on the disadvantage, "Unless the students embrace the process and assume some initiative, it can be quite time consuming."

Improvements

When asked about improvements planned for the discussion groups, a variety of responses were given. Dealing with the time commitment on the part of the instructor was an issue, as was structuring of the discussion boards and requiring participation. One English professor who had made no requirements for postings noted "If I use them again, it will be in a more structured fashion."

Conclusions/Discussion

As the review of literature indicated, the majority of respondents agreed that students who typically did not participate in class tended to participate more in online discussions. While the majority of the respondents did not use any particular structure, but used the discussions as more of a forum, most did agree they would add more structure in the future. As Palloff and Pratt (1999) noted, most respondents expressed interest in setting a clearer purpose and rules in using future discussion boards. One English professor wrote, "If I use them again, it will be in a

more structured fashion." The engineering professor stated, "I think that it would be good to advertise times when I will be there to answer questions immediately." Respondents also noted they would use discussion participation in future grading to encourage a more consistent student effort. There was agreement that the primary benefit for the students was that the discussions offered a deeper level of expression and understanding. The primary disadvantage was clearly the instructor's time commitment. One professor noted that the "chief advantage is that it gets students writing and reading each other's ideas." Perhaps such interaction with the discussions can be integrated within what is happening in the classroom and assessed through quizzes on materials posted. As educators continue to use new technologies such as discussion boards in their classes, we must evaluate best practices, offer training on uses, and demonstrate ways to integrate technologies effectively and time-efficiently. While this small, convenience sample is certainly not representative of current discussion board users, it was interesting to note the similarities of use, problems, and suggested improvements. Such study can further our understanding, as technology liaisons, on how to incorporate future recommendations and to initiate training opportunities

References

Berg, Z., & Collins, M. (1995). Computer-Mediated communication and the online classroom: Overview and perspectives. *Computer-Mediated Communications Magazine*. Vol. 2, No. 2. Retrieved September 26, 2000 from the World Wide Web: http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1995/feb/berge.html

Betts, K. S. (in press) Factors influencing faculty participation in distance education in postsecondary education in the United States: An institutional study. (Doctoral dissertation, The George Washington University, 1998). Dissertation Abstracts International: UMI.

Clark, T. (1993). Attitudes of higher education faculty toward distance education: A national survey. *TheAmerican Journal of Distance Education*, 7 (2), 19-33.

Dillon, C. L. and Walsh, S. M. (1992). Faculty: the neglected resource in distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education* 6 (3): 5-21.

Gifford, B. (1992). Where is the knowledge? Knowledge management, research and pedagogy in the electronic age. *Education Libraries, 16*(3), 14-22.

Goldberg, M. (2000). Message from Murray: The asychronous spectrum. *OTLNewsletter*. Retreived September 19, 2000 from the World Wide Web. http://booboo.webct.com/otln/Asynchronous_Spectrum.htm

Knowlton, D., Knowlton, H., & Davis, C. (2000). The whys and hows of online discussion. *Syllabus*, 13 (10), 54-58.

Merron, J. (1998) *Managing a Web-based Literature Course for Undergraduates*. Retrieved September 26, 2000 from the World Wide Web: http://www.westga.edu/~distance/merron14.html

Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (1984). Qualitative data analysis : a sourcebook of new methods. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

Palloff, R., and Pratt, K. (1999) Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Peters, K. (2000). Concrete steps for on-line discussion. *OTLNewsletter*. Retrieved September 19, 2000 from the World Wide Web: http://booboo.webct.com/otln/Asynchronous_Strategies.htm

Rockwell, K., Schauer, J., Fritz, S., & Marx, D. (2000). Faculty education: assistance and support needed to deliver education via distance. *On Line Journal of Distance Adminstration*. Retrieved September 19, 2000 from the World Wide Web: http://www.westga.edu/~distance/summer32.html

Schallert, D. L., Benton, R. E., Dodson, M. M., Lissi, M. R., Amador, N. A., & Reed, J. H. (1998). Conversational indicators of the social construction of knowledge in oral and written classroom discussions of reading assignments. Unpublished manuscript, University of Texas at Austin.